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SUBJECT: TURKEY: CURRENT THINKING ON THE IRAN NUCLEAR THREAT

REF: A. STATE 160872

[1](#)B. ANKARA 2907

Classified By: DCM Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Conversations with Turkish officials, parliamentarians, academics, and opinion-makers following publication of the latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran, reveal the following:

-- While the GOT remains opposed to and very concerned about a nuclear-armed Iran, it focuses on the growing regional influence Iran would have rather than Iran becoming an existential threat to Turkey.

-- Many Turks perceive a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran, and the potential instability that such an attack would portend, as more dangerous for Turkey than a nuclear-armed Iran.

-- Turkey's fear of further instability on its borders, and need for energy and access to Central Asia, limit the government's willingness to take a tougher stance against Iran.

-- Most opinion-makers see Turkish pursuit of its own nuclear weapon as extremely unlikely, but that view could change if Turkey becomes completely disillusioned with its EU prospects and its strategic relationship with the U.S.

-- The broad Turkish public views the new NIE as weakening the case for sanctions against Iran.

End Summary.

Turkey's Assessment of the Iranian Threat

[1](#)2. (C) Our contacts agree that civilian and military leaders are suspicious of Iranian intentions. Araman Kuloglu, a retired major general and analyst at the Global Strategic Institute said the suspicion results from the historic rivalry between the Persian and Ottoman empires, as well as more recent Iranian efforts to export the Islamic revolution to Turkey and Iran's earlier support for the PKK terrorist organization. There is general agreement among our interlocutors that a nuclear-armed Iran would dramatically alter the balance of power that has existed between Iran and Turkey since the seventeenth century. Ahmet Celik, Iran expert at the Prime Ministry, said such a paradigm shift in

regional geopolitics would lead to an even more assertive and emboldened Iran, extending its influence through militant Shi'a populations to form a "Shi'a Crescent" from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, dominating energy corridors.

13. (C) Despite concerns about a nuclear Iran taking a more aggressive posture in the region, there is wide agreement that Turkey would not be a primary target for an Iranian nuclear weapon, and that concerns about Iran's nuclear program should be addressed diplomatically, not militarily. Mustafa Kibaroglu, an expert on the Iran nuclear issue at Bilkent University, noted Turkey's preference for a diplomatic solution is in part due to the GOT's assessment that Iran is still "many years" away from developing a nuclear weapons capability -- a view that he believes is supported by the NIE on Iran. More importantly, according to Ibrahim Kalin, director of an Ankara-based think tank considered close to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey fears that a military strike against Iran could trigger greater instability in its neighborhood and lead to consequences even more dangerous for Turkey than a nuclear Iran.

What Would Turkey Do If Iran Goes Nuclear?

14. (C) If Iran were to obtain a nuclear weapon, it is extremely unlikely that Turkey would follow suit, according to most of our interlocutors. Even with increasingly negative public attitudes toward the U.S., EU, and NATO, most analysts and officials with whom we've spoken, including MFA's Deputy Director General for Non-Proliferation and

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Disarmament Ahmet Gun, consider it unimaginable for Turkey to develop its own nuclear weapons program since Turkey will have much more to lose than to gain. Pursuit of a nuclear weapons program would not only be inconsistent with Turkey's approach in international affairs, but would jeopardize Turkey's bid for EU membership and its relationship with the U.S., according to Sadi Cayci, a retired military judge and expert on international law at the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM). Furthermore, Turkey's leadership does not question the reliability of the NATO nuclear umbrella, according to Ali Sarikaya, an advisor to the Prime Minister. However, Kursat Atilgan, a retired general and current MP in the NATO Affairs Committee, notes that NATO credibility has been tarnished in Turkey because most Turks believe many NATO Allies, including the U.S., have not helped Turkey sufficiently in its struggle against PKK terrorism. Atilgan and others also recall NATO's hesitation in responding to Turkey's February 2003 request for missile defense assets in anticipation of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

15. (C) Turkey might pursue a nuclear weapons program, according to parliament's NATO Affairs Committee Chair Vahit Erdem, but only if the U.S. actively encourages Turkey to do so in response to an Iranian nuclear weapon. Others, such as ASAM's Bahadir Koc (a researcher on Turkey's relations with Europe and the U.S.) and retired general Atilgan, warn that if Turkey's prospect for EU membership diminishes further, and Turkey's strategic relationship with the U.S. is damaged by bilateral irritants and regional developments (PKK violence, Kurdish independence, and House passage of an Armenia genocide resolution), Turkey might consider an indigenous nuclear weapons program in response to Iran's.

Iran is Tomorrow's Problem, the PKK is Today's

16. (C) Iraq, and the PKK's presence there, remains Turkey's highest diplomatic and military priority. Civilian and military leaders in their public statements have indicated that the PKK, combined with the prospect of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, as the preeminent threats to Turkey's

security. This view has led the Turkish military to engage in tactical cooperation with the Iranian military against PKK/PJAK forces in northern Iraq, according to Ali Nihat Ozcan, an instructor for the Turkish jandarma and an analyst on Middle East terrorism and at TEPEV, a thinktank connected with TOBB University in Ankara. Turkey's growing energy needs, increasing investments in Iran's energy sector, as well as Iran's ability to restrict Turkey's access to its Central Asian trading partners, are also reasons for Turkey's reluctance to take a tougher line against Iran, according to Faruk Demir, an advisor to Energy Minister Guler.

17. (C) Several contacts, including Sedat Laciner, head of another Ankara-based thinktank, stressed that the GOT sees U.S. support for Iraqi Kurds, including the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), as a serious impediment to closer U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Iran. Many believe this collaboration comes at Turkey's expense. In this context, how oil-rich Kirkuk's status is resolved is widely seen as a litmus test of USG intentions. If Kirkuk comes under KRG control despite Turkish objections, Turkey will consider this a signal that the USG favors an independent Kurdistan over Turkey, according to both Laciner and Bilkent's Kibaroglu.

NIE Reaction

18. (C) Many of our interlocutors are puzzled by the timing of the NIE on Iran (ref b). They believe the NIE undercuts the case for any military action or a third round of UNSC sanctions. They assume Beijing and Moscow will use the NIE to argue against further sanctions. They also speculate that the NIE may be a signal of the U.S. backing away from promoting regime change in Iran, and possibly seeking a "grand bargain" with Iran -- with the U.S. normalizing ties with Iran in exchange for Tehran providing assurances on its nuclear program and ending support for terrorist groups. ASAM's Iran analyst Arif Keskin, an Iranian-born Azeri who visits Iran regularly, said Iranian politicians across the ideological spectrum are trying to take credit for the NIE. He assessed that the NIE will likely benefit President

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Ahmedinejad the most. While agreeing that the NIE might create an opening for the U.S. to engage Iran, he predicted such talks may be more difficult since Tehran now believes it has the upper hand against the U.S.

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